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SUBJECT: TRIBAL LEADER WARNS OF FUNDAMENTALISM, CORRUPTION IN KURDISH
REGION OF IRAQ

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KIRKUK 00000061 001.2 OF 002

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The leader of the second largest Kurdish tribe in Iraq, the Harki, identified corruption, nepotism and the growth of Islamic fundamentalism fueled by economic instability as the major threats to democracy in the Kurdish region of Iraq. Shaykh Mahmud Asad Fattah Harki said that the Iraqi people blamed the U.S. for both problems; further, they believe the U.S. is deliberately stalling the formation of the Iraqi Government because of its own self-interests. End Summary.

¶2. (C) This is the first cable reporting a series of interviews with leaders of four influential Kurdish tribes in Iraq, including the Harki, Baradusti, Surchi, and Zebari. On March 10, IPAO's met with Shaykh Harki, a former member of the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly and current member of the Kurdistan National Assembly.

Nepotism Feeds Corruption

¶3. (C) According to Shaykh Harki, "Corruption, which is flourishing throughout Iraqi politics and civil society, has weakened the democratic process in Iraq." He called corruption "the biggest virus from Al Basrah to the Kurdish region." Harki said that nepotism is the principal cause of corruption. He added that the absence of security and economic instability also stimulated corruption. He asserted that there needs to be a separation between the government and the political parties, citing the self-interest on the part of the political party leaders, who are profiting from a fuel crisis of their own making. (REFTEL) Party leaders were appointing loyalists rather than qualified candidates for government posts. He complained there was neither accountability nor punitive measures in place to counter political abuses.

KURDISH PUBLIC BLAMING COALITION FOR PROBLEMS

¶4. (C) Harki said that Kurdish public opinion towards the Coalition has shifted. The public blamed Americans for the fact that the Iraqi government was still not formed three months after the elections and believed that the U.S. was deliberately delaying the formation to protect its own interests. Harki

warned that many Kurds faulted the U.S. for the fuel crisis. "This is very serious. If the fuel shortage is not resolved, people will fight you over this crisis." The Kurdish people believed the U.S. could easily resolve these political and economic issues if it wanted. Moreover, these problems paved the way for terrorism and resulted in a separation between the Iraqi people and the U.S., even though the Iraqi leaders were talking to Americans. IPAO's reassured him that this was not the case. Harki, continuing in the same vein, noted that a woman on Iraqi TV recently said that life was better under Saddam Husayn because at least the Iraqi people had gasoline and electricity. That said, Harki estimated that ninety percent of the Kurds still support the MNF-I and want the Coalition to stay in the region. He added, however, that the KRG also has (Islamic) fanatics, like in the rest of Iraq.

FEAR OF GROWING FUNDAMENTALISM IN REGION

15. (C) Harki said that if there were no plan to fight fundamentalism, then the Islamic Parties would grow. Most people in the Kurdish region, illiterate and uneducated, would be drawn to the Islamic parties, if security and basic services did not improve. Harki recommended that the U.S. advise the Kurdish parties to better serve the Iraqi people. He suggested that the KRG is the best mechanism for providing services and resolving economic problems. Although the Kurdistan Islamic Union was not a group of fanatics now, he feared what they might do if they had more power.

TRIBES AND PARTIES TOGETHER ON POLITICAL MATTERS

16. (C) According to Harki, the Kurdish people wanted more than autonomy, they wanted independence. The U.S. and Iraqi Government needed to respect the implementation of Article 58 and agree on the right mechanism to minimize future problems. Harki said the Kurdish tribes shared the same political positions generally with the KDP and PUK on regional issues,

KIRKUK 00000061 002.2 OF 002

though each tribe might have members with different political affiliations. The tribes and parties in the past have clashed over power, but their future relations were unclear. The majority of Kurds continued to work with the two major parties because they did not trust Islamism. Harki said the tribes today have much less influence on their members than in the past.

HARKI TRIBAL HISTORY

17. (C) The Harki tribe is the second biggest Kurdish tribe in Iraq. Its members also live in Iran and Turkey. Originally the tribe consisted of shepherders from the Turkish Chwar Chal (Four Mountain Peaks) area and was considered one of the wealthiest Kurdish tribes. Shaykh Harki estimated that his tribe made up 10 percent of Kurds in the world. Within Iraq, the tribe primarily lives in Aqri (near Dahuk), Mosul, and Erbil. Outside Iraq, most Harki live in the Urmia province in Iran, and Shanzinan, Turkey. All tribal members are relatives. Shaykh Harki said he had one brother in Iran and a cousin in Turkey.

18. (C) Shaykh Harki described the process of succession in the Harki tribe as democratic. A council of tribal elders - consisting of 20 to 30 family heads - select its own leader in each geographic branch. The eldest man in the tribe used to oversee the entire tribe, but that is no longer the case. Shaykh Harki became the leader of the tribe in Iraq in 1985, when his uncle died. Harki's father preceded his uncle as tribal leader until his father's death in 1976.

19. (C) Shaykh Harki claimed the Iraqi Harkis enjoy good relations with its Iranian and Turkish branches, as well as the other Kurdish tribes in Iraq. Following the Kurdish uprising

against the Iraqi regime in 1991 the Council of the Tribes was dissolved. In 1993, Shaykh Harki and four other tribal leaders visited the U.S. State Department, the Foreign and Defense Ministries of the UK, and Saudi Arabia with the aim to gain protection for the Kurds from these nations. At that time, most Kurdish tribal leaders supported the Iraqi regime, except the Harki tribe in Arbil. Shaykh Harki said he supported the KDP because he lived within its administrative jurisdiction. There were no influential Harki women in business or politics, but Shaykh Harki said he had a plan to encourage more women to participate in government.

BIOGRAPHIC NOTE:

10. (C) Shaykh Harki was born in 1955. He has five children - three sons and two daughters - and has a bachelor's degree in agriculture from Baghdad University. His wife is an art teacher and is from the Dosti tribe; his brother-an AMCIT living in Alaska-has worked with the Coalition during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

COMMENT:

11. (C) Shaykh Harki expressed frustration that the U.S. had waited three years to meet with him, telling IPAO's that it was too late to understand the tribes. He said he was disappointed in how he had explained to several U.S. generals during the CPA days the importance of the Kurdish tribes, yet the U.S. had not reached out to him. Shaykh Harki was dressed in traditional tribal garb and understood and spoke some English - sometimes correcting the interpreter. He described his community as "first Muslim, second tribal." Although Shaykh Harki claimed that it was too late to understand the tribes, IPAO'S recently have had much success in meeting with and eliciting information from Kurdish tribal leaders. The shaykhs for the most part have been open and candid in their views, and IPAO's assess that our discussions with these leaders represent a window into the social context of the Kurdish region.

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